



## Georgia Department of Human Resources

# MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE IN GEORGIA

- Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by bacteria that infect the blood or membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It can lead to brain damage, disability, and death.
- It is most common in infants and in people with certain medical conditions. Risk of disease also increases during adolescence, peaking around age 18. College freshmen living in dormitories are also at higher risk.
- Common symptoms of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, sensitivity to light, sleepiness, confusion, and seizures.
- It can be treated with antibiotics, but treatment must be started early. Despite treatment, 10-15% of people who get the disease die from it. Another 10-20% suffer long-term consequences.

Two kinds of meningococcal vaccine are available; meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV, Menactra™) and meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPV, Menomune™). MCV is preferred because immunity lasts longer after vaccination. Both vaccines protect against four strains of meningococcal bacteria, including two of the three main types found in the U.S.

### What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria. The two most common forms of meningococcal disease are *meningitis* (a bacterial infection of the fluid and covering of the spinal cord and brain) and *septicemia* (an infection of the bloodstream). Meningitis has other causes as well, the most common being viral infection.

### How common is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is uncommon. In the U.S., each year there are about 2,100 cases (0.5-1 cases for every 100,000 people).

### How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis is commonly made by growing the bacteria from the spinal fluid or blood. Identifying the bacteria is important for selecting the best antibiotics.

### How are meningococcal bacteria spread?

The bacteria are transmitted from person-to-person in secretions from the nose and throat. They are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near an infected person, but require close contact. The bacteria can live outside the body for only a few minutes; so if the germs contaminate a desk or book, they soon die and won't infect a person who touches it later. As many as 2 in 10 people carry the bacteria in the back of the nose and throat at any given time, especially in winter. It is not yet understood why only a very small number of those who have the bacteria in their nose and throat develop disease while others remain healthy.

fact sheet

### **How can I avoid getting meningococcal disease?**

You can protect yourself by maintaining good health and hygiene. As a general recommendation, you should wash your hands frequently. Avoid sharing materials that make mouth contact, such as eating utensils, bottles, cigarettes, or lip balm. Contact a healthcare provider immediately if you are in close contact with someone who is known or suspected to have meningococcal infection. All persons should avoid smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke, which is are risk factors for meningococcal disease.

### **Who should be vaccinated against meningococcal disease?**

Meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV) should routinely be given to young adolescents (age 11-12 years) and to adolescents entering high school (approximately 15 years) who have not already received MCV. MCV is also recommended for college freshmen living in dormitories, although meningococcal polysaccharide (MPV) can be substituted.

Other populations at risk who should be vaccinated include:

- Microbiologists who work in a laboratory with meningococcal bacteria
- Military recruits
- Persons who travel to parts of the world where meningococcal disease is common, such as sub-Saharan Africa and travelers to the Hajj
- Persons with certain medical conditions, including terminal complement deficiency and absent or compromised spleen

No meningococcal vaccine is available for children younger than 2 years of age, who are at highest risk.

### **Where can I get more information?**

For more information about meningococcal disease in Georgia, contact the Division of Public Health at (404) 657-2700.

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[www.dhr.georgia.gov](http://www.dhr.georgia.gov)  
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